

**Adrienne Howe-Piening is the Coordinator of the NSW Department of Environment and Conservation's Repatriation Program.** Over the past six years she and her team have facilitated the return of 75 human remains and a diverse array of other cultural property to over twenty Aboriginal communities across NSW. But much Aboriginal cultural property still awaits a return to its rightful place. Why?

by ADRIENNE HOWE-PIENING

**THE WORD 'REPATRIATION' LITERALLY MEANS THE RETURN OF a person to their place of birth. Historically it has been used to refer to the return of armed forces personnel or war dead to their country of origin. Over the last two decades in Australia, however, 'repatriation' has come to mean the practice of returning indigenous cultural property from museums to their country – and community – of origin.**

The process of returning cultural objects represents far greater challenges for Aboriginal communities and practitioners than the return of ancestral remains, even though both broadly fall under the category of 'cultural property'.

The return of ancestral remains, while often an extremely moving and painful process (because it at once evokes the original loss or removal) is one of a homecoming, and cultural healing. Members of Aboriginal communities will often come together – even where factional dissent runs deep – to communally agree upon the location of 'resting places' in which to inter their ancestors. The common and significant feature of resting places is that in most cases the land on which they are situated (often either State reserve or Aboriginal-owned lands) is accessible to all members of a community. Moreover, while this land may be contested ground for other reasons (for example, the ability to access housing or to practice traditional custom), ongoing visitation access is generally assured for the purpose of reflection or commemoration.

The repatriation of cultural objects in Aboriginal communities presents a different set of challenges: Where will material be held in the long term? Does a suitable and secure location exist? How can the resourcing, management and cultural considerations associated with establishing and maintaining a Keeping Place be addressed? Someone must apply for funding to set one up and fit

it out. Staff and resources to ensure appropriate ongoing curation of material must be found. What about the cultural appropriateness of housing certain types of objects – especially ritual or ceremonial objects – within the vicinity of staff? Moreover, there are other, deeper, social questions for Aboriginal communities to consider and, to some extent, resolve, to successfully manage the return of cultural objects: grappling with cultural loss and dispossession; answering to cultural change; meeting the challenge of attaining broad consensus when dealing with government organisations and funding bodies; and addressing the often contested ownership of communal infrastructure within Aboriginal communities.

The responsibility to address some of these challenges – and many others that come up in the process of repatriating cultural objects – very often proves too great for Aboriginal communities and gets deferred to another time. As a result, much Aboriginal material remains unreturned in museums around the country.

## Coming home

*The DEC facilitated the hand back and transfer of custody of a collection of Aboriginal artefacts collected by Jack Absalom during the 1960s to Broken Hill LALC. The DEC purchased custom built display cabinets to house the material at Thankall Aboriginal Cultural Centre and the Broken Hill LALC.*



*Christine Tester, Aboriginal Heritage Conservation Officer, with her mother, Maureen O'Donnell, LALC Chair, at the ceremony.*

The challenges in meeting the cultural infrastructure requirements of Aboriginal communities reflect the diverse political, social and economic issues facing indigenous people across NSW and Australia. Just as Keeping Places exist within this broader context, so does the responsibility for developing this type of infrastructure. There are various government portfolios and agencies with responsibilities in this area including the Department of Communications, IT & the Arts and the NSW Ministry for the Arts as well as museums and land councils.

Aboriginal communities deserve better access to collections that are currently held in museums and they need support to establish and maintain the Keeping Places they need. The way to achieve this is to develop better integrated approaches across these agencies and to offer them greater involvement in the processes associated with the repatriation of their cultural property. ■

### May

20 – 21 May

 Bellingen Agricultural Show  
The 116th annual event. **BELLINGEN**  
Showgrounds Tel 02 6655 2084

25 May

 *Hotel Sorrento* by Australian playwright Hannie Rayson. Civic Centre **GUNNEDAH** Tel 02 6740 2266

26 May – 2 July

 *Lamentation and Earth Cry*  
Coinciding with World Environment Day.  
**LAKE MACQUARIE** City Art Gallery  
Tel 02 4935 8260

26 – 27 May

 Circus Oz The 'Laughing at Gravity' tour. **BATHURST** Memorial Entertainment Centre Tel 02 6333 6161